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ABSTRACT

Collection and evaluation, using both measurement and judgment techniques, of the available evidence relating to the use of i/t/a as a means of beginning reading with children between the ages of 5 and 7 were presented. The specific terms of reference were threefold: (1) to evaluate published research material on i/t/a from both Great Britain and the United States; (2) to collect and evaluate the views of teachers and other knowledgeable people who had been closely connected with i/t/a in practice; and (3) to suggest further research projects connected with i/t/a. Conclusions drawn from the research evidence were similar to those drawn from the verbal evidence, obtained by interviewing nearly 400 people and visiting 46 schools, observing hundreds of children and talking to them and their teachers. There were mainly favorable impressions of i/t/a as related to reading, spelling, and writing improvements. However, recommendations for large-scale experiments, comparing the results of different beginning reading approaches, including i/t/a; further fundamental research into the early stages of learning to read; and production of more useful tests of early reading ability were made. References are included. (CL)

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AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF i.t.a.: A BRITISH GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED REPORT

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I BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Schools Council, although a government-sponsored body, is completely independent. Its main purpose is to investigate new developments in schools curricula and examinations in England and Wales, and to co-ordinate and disseminate information. It also arranges programmes of evaluation concerning certain important new projects, in order to provide teachers and other educationists with

independent evidence, enabling them to formulate their own answers to the question: 'Can the claims made for this new approach be justified?'

The first such evaluation to be initiated by the Schools Council was the independent evaluation of i.t.a. undertaken by Professor Warburton and the writer during 1966-7. The main report of some 200,000 words was published in 1969 (20), followed by a mini-version in 1970 (19).

The authors' brief was to collect and evaluate, by means of both measurement and judgement techniques, the available evidence relating to the use of i.t.a. as a means of beginning reading with infants (i.e. 5-7 year olds). Their specific terms of reference were threefold: to evaluate published research material on i.t.a. from both Great Britain and the U.S.A., including making an appraisal of the methodology underlying the researches; to collect and evaluate the views of teachers and other knowledgeable people who had been closely connected with i.t.a. in practice; and to suggest future research projects connected with i.t.a., which might be deemed necessary.

Professor Warburton was responsible for the evaluation of research evidence, while the writer investigated the extent of the use of i.t.a. and appraised informed opinion and experience. The authors were faced with many problems: not only was there a

vast amount of available evidence but there were serious limitations on time, money and personnel. They emphasise in their report that, although not entirely satisfied with the methods they evolved, they did set out with open minds, to collect as much as possible of the relevant evidence and to evaluate and present it fairly.

As it is clearly impossible to even list all the different facets of this large piece of research in one short paper, the writer mentions only a few selected aspects, mainly from her own sections of the report.

II THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Warburton began his appraisal by devising an ideal experimental design appropriate for researches into classroom teaching of reading. Many of the research reports on i.t.a. which he first examined, he discarded as being totally inadequate. The remaining 17 research reports; 11 from the U.S.A., 4 from England and 2 from Scotland, he examined in detail. /References (1) - (17)/

Each was summarised by asking some 40 questions, based on the ideal experimental design, concerning its scope, design, conduct, techniques and presentation of results. A proportion of even these selected researches ~~were~~ was found to be badly designed and inadequately reported. For example, even such important information as the timing of the testing, the medium in which the children were tested, and the proportion of children who at the

time of testing had made the transition to t.o., was not given or was muddled up.

In these circumstances, Warburton's plan of appraisal enabled him to decide on the relative weighting to be given to the conclusions set out in each piece of research. He ranked most highly Downing's (4) second experiment and the experiments reported by Milne (11) and Robinson (12), although unfortunately only interim results were available for these, at that time. In certain researches, with otherwise commendable designs, Warburton considered that the use of different materials and methods confounded the results which might have been attributable to media.

As the principle conclusions drawn from the research evidence were similar to those drawn from the verbal evidence collected by the writer, they are not listed here but the few instances in which the research evidence and verbal evidence differed, are noted later.

III THE EXTENT OF THE USE OF i.t.a.

A questionnaire sent to the 163 local education authorities (l.e.a.s.) in England and Wales showed that in 1966, 1,554 schools in 140 l.e.a.s. were using i.t.a., to some extent with infants. This represented 9.2 per cent of all schools containing infants. The spread was not even: in one authority all infant schools were using i.t.a., while in others only a few schools were concerned.

Only 2 per cent of the schools which had begun to use i.t.a. had discontinued its use. Their reasons for doing so were usually administrative rather than dissatisfaction with the alphabet itself.

IV THE VERBAL EVIDENCE

While most of the verbal evidence refers to children in English schools, a certain amount arose in interviews and correspondence with teachers and educationists from other countries, including the U.S.A., and from their publications. The writer interviewed nearly 400 people, including teachers, advisers, inspectors, lecturers, educational psychologists, linguists, research workers, parents and publishers. In addition, she visited 46 schools, observed hundreds of children, and talked to them and their teachers.

Time did not permit the employment of a sampling technique for the selection of people to be interviewed. The plan adopted was rather a collection of evidence in pre-determined categories, care being taken to gather divergent opinions within categories when these existed. The steps taken to avoid bias in this procedure are outlined in the report. The advice of local officials and head teachers was sought in order to obtain cross-sections of schools, and of pupils within schools, The interviews were designed to encourage people to express their views freely, regardless of the direction these views might take. The independent

nature of the enquiry was emphasised and the fact that all shades of opinion were equally valuable.

1. Mainly Favourable Impressions of i.t.a.

The majority of the verbal evidence was in favour of i.t.a. as a medium for beginning reading with infants. Only a small minority of those interviewed expressed unfavourable opinions or doubts. The most noticeable trend in this mass of evidence was that the people most experienced about actual teaching and learning in infant classes were most enthusiastic, while those who had misgivings were generally people who had neither taught children to read by means of i.t.a. nor closely observed it in use.

The majority group favouring i.t.a., consisted of most of the teachers who had used it, a large percentage of H.M. Inspectors, many but not all of those local advisers experienced in observing i.t.a. and most of the parents concerned.

2. Reading

The overwhelming conclusions of teachers and other knowledgeable observers was that infants using i.t.a. learned to read earlier, more easily, more happily and at a faster rate than similar children using traditional orthography (t.o.). As the regularity of the sound-symbol relationship meant that the child's own attempts at reading unknown words were generally successful, frustrations were minimised and he soon gained a sense of achievement. Consequently, young children chose to read individually more often, read for longer periods of time and read many more books, which soon extended far beyond basic reading schemes, to include a wide variety of story books and reference books,

as well as comics, newspapers and magazines.

When i.t.a. was first introduced, teachers had feared that children might find difficulty in transferring from i.t.a. to t.o. Yet in this enquiry, without exception, every teacher who had actually seen children make this transition in reading reported that the children experienced no difficulty. This was one of the few points where the verbal evidence and research evidence diverged. Certain of the research results showed that children who had recently transferred from i.t.a. to t.o., scored less on t.o. tests than on the same tests administered earlier in i.t.a. The writer concluded that a drop of a few points in test scores, even when statistically significant, did not necessarily represent a functional set-back in reading. She was convinced that had a functional set-back in reading occurred, the experienced teachers who gave evidence would have noted it, and would not have hesitated to include it with the other disadvantages of i.t.a. which they reported. Accordingly, she considered the verbal evidence on this score to be irrefutable.

The effect on children's reading standards of having learned to read initially with i.t.a. was not nearly as pronounced after about three years, as in the first year or two. About half the teachers considered that at 8 or 9 years of age the original i.t.a. children retained certain advantages over t.o. children; while others saw little difference between the two groups at this stage.

3. Writing and Spelling

Experienced observers reported that children's spelling in i.t.a. was more frequently correct than when t.o. was the medium of instruction. Moreover, no teacher reported that children taught initially by i.t.a. were less able spellers in t.o. than children who had used t.o. from the beginning.

The comparative simplicity and regularity of i.t.a. spelling had given children confidence about their ability to spell any word they chose. The result had been a marked increase in the quantity and quality of children's free written work, which had delighted teachers as much as, if not more than, the improved reading.

4. Slow-learning Children

More than half the teachers who had used i.t.a. were convinced that children of all levels of intelligence made better progress in reading and writing with i.t.a. than with t.o. The remainder were divided between believing it to be most effective for the brightest or for the slowest children. Thus only a few teachers considered that i.t.a. had not helped the slowest children, while many regarded the reduction in the number of non-readers and struggling readers in infant classes as one of its principle advantages.

This was the second point on which the two kinds of evidence differed to some extent. The research evidence suggested that i.t.a. was more effective with bright than with dull children. Again, the writer supported the teachers' conclusions. She pointed out that in many of the reported researches this conclusion was based on the results of t.o. tests administered to children who had not transferred from i.t.a. to t.o. - results unacceptable as valid measurements of reading attainment. Moreover, the progress made in the early stages of reading by the slowest pupils while clearly discernible to the teacher is often difficult to measure objectively by tests. It is also interesting to note that Downing (18) has revised some of his earlier conclusions on this score and now reports that i.t.a. does help slow learners.

5. The Advantages and Disadvantages of i.t.a.

The advantages of i.t.a. listed by teachers and close observers far outweighed the disadvantages. Advantages relating to reading, spelling and writing were noted by nearly everyone giving evidence, but other subjects such as Mathematics and Science were also mentioned as benefitting. Additional advantages reported were as follows.

(a) Children tended to develop confidence and independence, and to show initiative and responsibility in other aspects of school life at an earlier age.

(b) There had been an increase in individual study and exploration which was in line with modern heuristic methods of learning.

(c) Teachers found they had more time to devote to the needs of individual children and to aspects of the curriculum other than the language arts.

(d) Teachers themselves had become more interested in reading.

(e) There had been an increase in parents' interest in their children's reading, leading to closer co-operation between parents and teachers.

The danger most frequently mentioned was that children, not yet ready to transfer from i.t.a. to t.o., might have to move to another school in which i.t.a. was not used. This problem could occur when a family moved. It might be encountered to a lesser degree, in England, if children were promoted at the age of 7+ to a junior school not eager to allow slower children to continue with i.t.a. Other disadvantages reported were that the child sees i.t.a. in school and t.o. outside school, that some parents find themselves unable to respond to their children's requests for help with reading and spelling, and that there are fewer books and other reading materials printed in i.t.a. than in t.o.

5. The Headteacher's Basic Question

The section of the report relating to the verbal evidence concluded by squarely facing the headteacher's basic, practical question about whether the children in his school would be likely to benefit by a change from t.o. to i.t.a. The answer given is that, providing the staff support the change and that continuity

of approach is fairly certain, a headteacher deciding to use i.t.a. as the initial medium for beginning reading can be confident that at the very least children are unlikely to suffer, and that "there is a substantial body of evidence which indicates that most children will benefit in a variety of ways".

The replies of those teachers who had used i.t.a. for a number of years and who were also experienced in using various t.o. approaches to beginning reading, to two 'key questions' are of relevance here. Of 29 such headteachers, asked whether they would continue to use i.t.a. or return to t.o., not one expressed an intention of returning to t.o. 90 class teachers of similar experience were asked whether, if they were appointed headteachers of new schools, they would use t.o. or i.t.a. 87 indicated they would choose i.t.a., 2 said t.o. and one was undecided.

V CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE TOTAL EVIDENCE

Although the two kinds of evidence on which this report was based, were evaluated by means of different techniques, by two people whose backgrounds, interests and beliefs were far from identical, the conclusions proved to be fairly consistent and to lead broadly in the same direction - that is towards a favourable impression of i.t.a. as a means of beginning reading with infants.

However, the authors considered that it would be unfortunate if the generally favourable tone of their report were taken to

imply that the use of i.t.a. for beginning reading with infants was the final and only solution. They were conscious that only one new medium has been compared with certain traditional ways of using t.o., and that other media or other ways of using t.o. might be found to be equally or even more effective than i.t.a. Accordingly, one of their principle recommendations for future reading research was that a large-scale experiment, comparing the results of using a number of different approaches to beginning reading, including i.t.a., should be undertaken, and that many more of the classroom variables should be controlled than had been usual in former experiments. It was also concluded that a great deal of fundamental research into the early stages of learning to read was required, and that there was an urgent need for the production of more useful tests of early reading ability.

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